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ABSTRACT

This paper situates dialogue with students about their learning (descriptive feedback) within the larger frame of reflection, examining how teachers involved in inservice teacher education have used descriptive feedback and noting its impact on their teaching and on students' learning. It presents case studies of teachers and describes the role of descriptive feedback, focusing on its purposes (e.g., gathering information about what students learned and how they learned it) and processes (descriptive feedback, which is reflection in action, is a very simple process on the surface which can occur after or in the midst of an activity or group of activities). Next, the paper discusses learning how to receive descriptive feedback, and it looks at three shifts in teachers' perspectives seen over the years: from seeing teaching, self, and the curriculum as primary to seeing students and their learning as central; from seeing students as people to be won over, or as adversaries, to seeing them as partners whose share in power is equal; and from seeing teaching as the cause of learning to seeing it as a response to learning. The paper concludes that descriptive feedback is part of the larger scheme of reflective practice. (Contains 38 references.) (SM)

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Seeing and Feeling Seen: The Central Roles of Description and Descriptive Feedback in Reflective Practice

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The ultimate descriptive task, for both artists and scientists, is to "ensoul" what one sees, to attribute to it the life one shares with it; one learns by identification.

From *A Feeling for the Organism: The life and work of Barbara McClintock*, by Evelyn Fox Keller, p. 204.

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Vignette #1

I am at a parent teacher conference sitting at the flesh colored, heavy plastic student desk waiting to hear about my son's work in math class. Across from me, in a desk abutting mine, sits Jon's 7th grade math teacher. He greets me, we make some small talk about the awful weather, but with only 20 minutes to talk, I am eager to hear what he has to say about Jon. He pulls out a grade book, looks down the list for Jon's name, reads me his grades and says "It looks like he's doing fine." That's all he has to say. He is unable to tell me more about Jon and his work. I leave feeling he doesn't have a clue who my son is.

Vignette #2

I am walking with a colleague whose children have been students in the third grade classroom of a teacher I know. This teacher has been working for many years with Patricia Carini of the Prospect Center in North Bennington, Vermont on the practice of description: descriptive reviews of children, descriptions of student work, and descriptions of her own practice. When I ask my colleague her feelings about this teacher she replies, "She knew *my children. She knew them* so well."

Introduction

I tell my students, most of whom are practicing teachers in their first five years of teaching, "There is no greater gift you can give to a child or her parents than the gift of feeling known, of feeling 'seen'." The central roles that description, and descriptive feedback from students in particular, play in learning to see students and their learning, and where description belongs in the larger picture of reflective practice, form the twin foci of this paper. I have found that when teachers begin to ask students about their learning, and encourage students to describe that learning in detail, that fundamental shifts occur. Teachers' attention shifts from themselves, their teaching, and the curriculum—"what and how well am I teaching?"—to the students and their learning—"what and how are they learning?" The relationship between teachers and their students also shifts,

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from one of "power over" to "partnership with." When this happens, it becomes difficult to ignore students and their experiences as learners, and plow through the curriculum needing to be "covered."

A recent article by Alison Cook-Sather (2001) in *Educational Researcher*, neatly summarizes the work that has been done thus far in documenting efforts to authorize students' voices, both in the classroom and in research. She details the work of various teachers, teacher-researchers, and university researchers who have made central to their work students' perspectives on their experiences in school. She divides the work into two main groups: in-school pedagogical studies and out-of-school research-based studies, all of which call for listening to students, acting on what students have to say in reforming education, and sharing power with students in the process (2001, p. 9). In the pedagogical realm, she points to the efforts of three different groups: those who look through a constructivist lens (Duckworth, 1987; Commeyras, 1995; Heshusius, 1995; Dahl, 1995; Johnston & Nicholls, 1995; and Lincoln, 1995), and who see students as active creators of their knowledge rather than recipients of others' knowledge; those who look through a critical pedagogical lens (McLaren, 1989; Shor,1987, 1992; Freire, 1990; Banks, 1996; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; and Nieto, 2000), and whose focus has been on developing "multi-cultural and anti-racist educational theories and practices [that] counter discriminatory and exclusionary tendencies in education" (2001, p. 6) ; and those whose frame is a postmodern and post-structuralist feminist pedagogy (Orner, 1992; Ellsworth, 1992; Finders, 1997; Lewis, 2001; Alverman et al., 1996; Moje & Shepardson,1998; and Gore,

1992), who support challenging the existing oppressive power relationships, but who also demand that all parties critically question their own motives and practices in the process. The work of those in each of these camps has engaged teachers in gathering students' perspectives on various classroom-based problems and questions. They universally call for learning to listen to students and for sharing power for decisions about curriculum and activities with them.

The realm of formalized research seeks to include students as both sources and gatherers of data. But while the domain of pedagogical efforts remains largely bounded by the classroom and school, the domain of traditional research spans a wide range of concerns from gathering student perspectives on female sexuality (Fine, 1993) to documenting their take on how to get into college (Light, 2001). Research that values students' voices also includes efforts of social critics like Jonathan Kozol (1991) as well as research the attempts not only to gather student data, but also to employ students themselves as researchers engaged in formulating their own interpretative frames and conclusions (Schultz & Cook-Sather, 2001; Oldfather & Thomas, 1998).

All of these efforts stress the importance of listening to students. To do so well, they argue, requires "major shifts on the part of teachers, students, and researchers in relationships and in ways of thinking and feeling about the issues of knowledge, language power and self" (Oldfather,1995, p. 87) as well as in their basic beliefs "about who has authority in educational practice, [and] who can author perspectives on education" (Cook-Sather, p. 10). In addition, they engage in addressing more general questions about teaching and learning (e.g. literacy

practices of middle school students, effects of peer-led literacy circles, the content of students' exchanges in small group writing tasks) that might be useful to a more general audience.

These are all important studies that make a strong case for authorizing students' voices. My own review of these articles, however, detected a vagueness around *how* to listen and where such listening fits in terms of every day reflective practice. There is a general call to listen, but the complex, skillful act of listening itself is not described. In addition, how teacher who are not engaged in formal action or collaborative research with university researchers, as most teachers are not, can engage students' perspectives is not clear. How do teachers, for whom time is their most precious commodity, access students' perspectives without necessarily engaging in a full-blown research project? This paper is devoted to situating dialogue with students about their learning (which I term descriptive feedback) within the larger frame of reflection, providing a framework for that dialogue, examining how teachers involved in in-service teacher education have used descriptive feedback, and the impact it has made on their teaching and their students' learning.

Description in Reflective Practice

Reflection and reflective practice (which I am equating here with inquiry) are terms that have been so overused that they have lost their definition. In an attempt to gain some clarity in regard to reflection, I have returned to John Dewey's *How We Think* (1933) (Rodgers, 2002a). In *How We Think* as well as in other works (*Democracy and Education* (1916), *Education and Experience*

(1938)) Dewey articulates in detail his concept of reflection. In brief, it consists of six phases that consistently appear in his writing about the process. (For an extensive discussion of each phase, please see Rodgers, 2002a.)

1) An experience;
2) Spontaneous interpretation of the experience;
3) Framing the problem(s) or the question(s) that arises out of the experience;
4) Generating possible explanations for the problem(s) or question(s) posed;
5) Ramifying what has been selected in (4) into full blown hypotheses;
6) Experimenting or testing the selected hypothesis.

After an extensive exploration of Dewey's construction of reflective thinking, I have constructed my own framework that has its roots in Dewey's (Rodgers, 2002b). I have collapsed phases 2 and 3 into "description," and phases 4 and 5 into "analysis." Phases 1 and 6 remain essentially the same. Phase 1 I have altered slightly to include the notion of presence (which I explain below), and to phase 6 I have incorporated Dewey's notion of "intelligence." So the four phases of reflection with which I have my students work are:

1) Presence in experience: learning to see;
2) Description of experience: learning to describe and differentiate;
3) Analysis of experience: learning to think critically and to create theory
4) Experimentation: learning to take intelligent action.

I briefly describe each of these phases below.[1]

[1] For a more extensive discussion of these phases and the ways in which I work with teachers on each one, please see Rodgers, C. (2002b). Seeing student learning: Teacher change and the role of reflection, *Harvard Educational Review*, *Vol. 72*, Number 2, pp. 230-253.

Presence in experience: learning to see

Ultimately, reflection must aim at improved student learning[2]. This can best happen if teachers are present to students' learning, and able to respond with the best possible next step. The more a teacher is present, the more she[3] can perceive the intricate and complex workings of classroom life. The more she perceives, the greater the potential for an intelligent response. I recently had a teacher, Cara, describe to me her experience of presence. She was teaching her second graders about writing personal narratives. "I was *there*," she said.

> I began by writing the words [personal and narrative] on the chart paper (we were situated comfortably on the carpet). I began by asking the students to tell me what the word personal meant to them. From here we listed and generated a wonderful list of ideas, and then moved onto discuss narrative. With guidance and clues, a student shouted out, "It's a story about your experiences!" In the short time that I took to allow them to discover the word, they were able to come up with their own understanding. As I guided this discussion, I felt amazed by their responses and understanding. In addition to that, I provided them with a story written by a second grade student. Before reading [it] I decided to try [asking], "What do you notice about this piece?" Again, they blew me away with the insight regarding picture, paragraphs, and various other comments related to what they saw. All of this was done before we even read a personal narrative. I feel that we

[2] By "improved learning" I remain Deweyan in my perspective, seeing the best learning as student-generated, connected across disciplines, linked to the world outside the classroom, interactive, and democratic in nature, in service of a more just and equitable society.
[3] In an effort to balance gender references, I will use he and she alternatively to represent the teacher.

> experienced the process of "uncovering" [that Hawkins and Duckworth talk about[4]]. It has been a while since I felt this excited about a lesson, and it certainly [was] reflected through the students' [responses]. In addition, they were excited to generate their own thoughts for writing their own narratives. (CS, 2/25/03)

Cara makes the connection between being present and helping students to "uncover" the essence of a topic rather than "cover" its surface qualities. She was "with" her students as they uncovered something that was as much a surprise to her as it was to them. Though she knew where she wanted her students to arrive (an understanding of personal narrative) she was along for the ride on their journey to this understanding, as wide-awake to their learning as they were to the idea of narrative. This attitude of wide-awakeness (Greene, 1973) and the experience of forgetting self, of non-ego, (Heshusius, 1995) in the service of seeing student learning is what I mean by presence. When a teacher is present to student learning, she attends to the sense that students *are* making rather than the sense that they *aren't* making, and is ready to help them build on it. Because she is less focused on getting students to the right answer, (an experience teachers have described as "pulling" students) she is able to attend to the learning itself, and to respond with the best next step.

Cara's stance of "not knowing" as she listens to her students' sense-making is the stance of a researcher. Duckworth (1987/1996; 2000) describes reflective teaching as a kind of research where the questions a teacher asks are

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[4] Hawkins, D. quoted in Duckworth, E. (1987), "The having of wonderful ideas," in *The having of wonderful ideas and other essays on teaching and learning*. New York: Teachers College Press, pp. 1-14.

"the same as those that a researcher into the nature of human learning wants to ask. … [A teacher] is in a position through teaching to pursue questions about the development of understanding that one could not pursue in any other way" (p. 134).

Description of experience: learning to describe and differentiate

Unlike presence, which implies an in-the-moment kind of reflection-in-action, description generally is done on-action, after the moment is over. Yet one is able to describe an event or a person only to the extent to which he or she has been present to it/him/her. In a sense, description after the moment is practice for seeing in the moment. As Raymond Williams once wrote, "we learn to see a thing by learning to describe it" (quoted in Himley & Carini, 2000, p. vi).

The purpose of description in the reflective process is to educate people to see. As Carini (2001) has said,

> Describing requires that I stand back and consider. Describing requires that I not rush to judgment or conclude before I have looked. Describing makes room for something to be fully present. Describing is slow, particular work. I have to set aside familiar categories for classifying or generalizing. I have to *stay with* the subject of my attention. I have to give it time to speak, to show itself (p. 153).

I have found that description is the hardest aspect of reflection for teachers. Teachers are generally interested in solving problems and getting things done, and are prone to move as quickly as possible to conclusions and solutions. Slowing down to describe the elements of the situation is hard, initially. Description may

be done in isolation, but only comes to fruition when done in the company of others. As Carini says, in learning to describe in the company of others, we learn that each of us sees the world only partially, no matter how present we are to it. She writes, "I learn that when I see a lot, I am still seeing only a little and partially. I learn that when others join in, the description is always fuller than what I saw alone" (2001, p. 163). Dewey (1916) said much the same thing:

> The experience has to be formulated in order to be communicated. To formulate requires getting outside of [the experience], seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with the life of another so that it may be got into such form that he can appreciate its meaning (p. 6).

I will return to description and the role of descriptive feedback in a moment.

Analysis of experience: learning to think critically and to create theory

This phase of the reflective cycle asks teachers to begin to generate a number of theories about what may be going on in a particular situation. It takes the data that have been gathered in the descriptive phase and looks for meaning. What patterns might be evident? How is this situation like others? What do experts in the field who have studied similar situations have to say? There is a dialectical relationship between the analysis phase and the descriptive phase, as certain conclusions or interpretations call for additional data, and additional data suggest new interpretations.

I find David Hawkins' (1974/2002) I, Thou, and It[5] framework to be a useful device in this phase as it helps to organize the complex world teaching and learning into manageable pieces and to force teachers to see these pieces in dynamic relationship with each other. I have added context to the framework as well so that everything from the physical nature of the classroom to the imperatives of national standards have room to be taken into account.

While the process of analysis involves going to outside sources it is grounded in the text of teachers' experiences. It is important that they read what experts have to say, but equally important that they read critically in light of their collective experience. In addition, in the process of analysis it is important that teachers question what they mean by certain accepted terms that we all seem to understand but, when plumbed, have very different meanings for different people. For example, what do we mean when we say that someone has learned? What does it mean to be engaged? Does engagement guarantee learning? Is it the same thing as being "on task?"

Finally, analysis involves work on the self. The meaning one ascribes to an event rests in large part on who one is. If, as Parker Palmer (1998) says, we teach who we are, then it is incumbent upon each of us to understand who we are and how the assumptions we bring to bear when we look at and seek to understand any situation are shaping what we choose to see and the understanding that we render.

Experimentation: learning to take intelligent action

[5] In this framework I is the teacher, Thou is the student, and it is the subject matter that is the focus of their attention. See Hawkins, D. "I, thou, and it," in *The informed vision: Essays on learning and human nature*. New York: Algora Publishing, pp. 51-64.

It takes time to get to this phase. The suggestions for action that characterize this phase come only after the hard work of description and analysis, and are based on well thought out and mutually constructed theory. This is why the action is seen as intelligent rather than routine (Dewey, 1938). Dewey was clear that reflection included action and not just plans for action. (He referred to this as being "responsible.") In this way learning is continuous—each experiment becomes the next experience (in fact, the two words share they same Latin root, *expiriri*.).

The Role of Descriptive Feedback

There are numerous ways in which description can be employed as a way of gathering data about teaching and learning—about what, how, how well, and how much children have learned, and how they feel about their experiences as students. Some of the most powerful of these processes come from Carini and her colleagues and includes the descriptive review of a child, and the description of student work.[6] In addition, the work of Steve Seidel and David Allen and their colleagues at a Harvard's Project Zero, which include the collaborative

[6] See Himley, M. & Carini, P. (Eds.), (2000). *From another angle: Children's strengths and school standards*. New York: Teachers College Press. Carini's descriptive processes also include description of the school as a work, and description of teachers' work, description of curriculum. Almost any aspect of the world and work of school can be described. In my own work with teacher-students I ask them to describe assigned readings. Students make two-column journal entries where the first column includes a quote from the reading that is then "described" by the student, and the second column is their response to the author's ideas.

assessment of student work,[7] and tuning protocols,[8] are effective means of seeing more deeply into who students are and the strengths they bring to their work. What I want to focus on here, however, is a less-well-known, less used, but surprisingly effective means of seeing students and their learning: the use of descriptive feedback.

Descriptive feedback[9] is a reflective conversation between a teacher and his or her students wherein students describe their cognitive and affective experience as learners relative to a specific learning experience or group of experiences. It is important here to note how descriptive feedback is different from student self-assessment. Where self-assessment asks students to take stock of what they have done and is evaluative in nature—often requiring students to grade their own work and assess their movement towards certain goals—descriptive feedback asks students to reflect on how they have learned and is descriptive in nature. Where self-assessment is weighted against the authority of the teacher's assessment and certain external criteria, students are the sole authority of their internal experiences as learners. When a teacher asks students to assess their work, they have generally already formed an opinion of their own. With descriptive feedback, there is no room for opinion. The stance of the teacher in asking for descriptive feedback is neutral. She asks questions to which she has no answers and has formed no preconceived judgments. She awaits the answers

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[7] Seidel, S. (1998). "Wondering to be done: The collaborative assessment conference" in *Assessing student learning: From grading to understanding*. New York: Teachers College Press, pp. 21-39.

[8] Allen, D. (1998). "The tuning protocol: Opening up reflection," in *Assessing student learning: From grading to understanding*. New York: Teachers College Press, pp. 87-104. See also Rodgers, C. "Seeing student learning: Teacher change and the role of reflection," *Harvard Educational Review. Vol. 72*, Number 2, pp. 230-253.

[9] Also called structured feedback; see Rodgers (2002b), and Broderick (1981).

with genuine curiosity and open-mindedness

(Dewey, 1933), awake to the possibility that what she has observed and what students have experienced may be totally different phenomena. She grants her students the authority of their experience as learners—they are the experts of this domain—as she herself assumes the stance of a learner.

The Purposes and Processes of Descriptive Feedback

The purposes of descriptive feedback are multiple. The primary purpose is to gather information about what students learned and how they learned it, including what helped their learning and what hindered it. In the process of describing one's experiences as a learner, a second purpose is accomplished—an awareness of one's learning processes. Most of us remain unaware of how, exactly, we learn what we do. I do not mean by this, our "learning styles," a label that obscures and renders simple processes that are delightfully rich and complex. A third purpose is to create a community whereby the teacher as well as each student becomes aware of the multiple ways of learning and making sense of the world, and in the process, acquires new ways to learn and to see. Asking for feedback also gives students the chance to express their feelings about their experiences as learners as well as their ideas about what would make their learning more fruitful. In all, feedback gives everyone the chance to slow down, to breathe, to make sense of where they've been, how they got there, where they should go next, and the best way to get there—a decision made with students, rather than in spite of them.

Descriptive feedback is a deceptively simple process on the surface. It can take place after or in the midst of an activity or group of activities. The key is that

activity at that point stops, and together teacher and students look back into the experience. It is reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) *with* students. They may be reflecting on five minutes of activity or five weeks. The teacher asks students to reflect on their experience as learners with such questions as: What did you learn? How do you know you learned it? What got in the way of your learning? What helped your learning? and How did you feel? The questions are not written in stone nor do they comprise any kind of protocol. However, I have found that they give teachers a structure within which to learn about the power of feedback until they can develop questions of their own that remain descriptive rather than leading in nature. A key to the success of these questions is that the teacher *does not know the answers*. She is asking students for information as experts on their experience. She is, in a very real way, the learner and the researcher. Below I take each of these questions and the information they tend to reveal.

The first question, What did you learn, is tricky in that it asks students to really think about what it means to have learned something. It is a different question from What did I teach you? or What did we do today? It forces students (with guidance from the teacher) to look inside and ask if they have internalized what they were studying or simply memorized it. Will they have to strain to remember the information—a formula in math for example—or are they confident that they have internalized (and therefore need not strain to remember) the math beneath the formula? Most importantly, it forces teacher and students to distinguish between "covering" subject matter and learning it. In so doing discussion of this first question also forces the teacher to consider which effort

she is engaged in and why. The teacher must be committed to a students' learning in the asking of this question. If she hears that they indeed have *not* learned what was taught, she must be prepared to accept this reality, to resist the temptation to blame students (or herself), and do the work necessary to assure understanding, even as it means *not* covering everything in the plan.

The second question, How do you know you learned it? asks students to provide evidence for what they have said in response to the first question. For example, students may say they have learned to conjugate the verb *avoir* in French, but if their response to the question How do you know? is "Because you taught it," there is clearly work to do in clarifying what it means to learn something. Answering this question also reveals the process that students went to through to internalize information. For example, a student in an art class learning the difference between foreground and background stated that he knew he had learned the difference when he "[saw] two paintings, one with each example of foreground and background. Once I saw that," he said, "it made total sense."

The third and fourth questions, What helped your learning? and, What hindered your learning? ask students to look at themselves, the activity, their peers, their teacher, and their environment[10] to discern what supported and got in the way of their learning. For example, in my own work with students of teaching, students are able to say that their own harsh judgment of themselves and their performance gets in the way of their being able to take risks. At other times,

[10] These four elements, the teacher, the students, the subject matter and the environment, represent one way to divide the complex territory of teaching and learning into manageable chunks. They are derived from David Hawkins' "I, Thou, and It" where I is the teacher, thou the student, and it the subject matter. I have added environment or context as a fourth element to consider.

they are aware that prior knowledge or assumptions such as the belief that if they aren't in front of the class imparting information, they aren't really "teaching," get in the way of their adopting more constructivist approaches.

Another example comes from Jamie's class. Jamie is a middle school art teacher and asked her students for feedback after they had begun to turn their two dimensional watercolor mythical monsters into 3-D statues. In response to the dual questions, What got in the way of your learning? and What would have helped your learning more? students cited their own internal obstacles (not wanting to bother the teacher, not paying enough attention, making assumptions, and not being better organized)…

> Courtney: What got in the way of my learning the directions of how to create a sculpture was that I was absent for all the demonstrations and I didn't want to bother you after school to get extra help and now I feel confused and really mad at this project.
>
> Brad: What got in the way of my learning is that I didn't pay enough attention to the steps we needed to take and need to know more about what 3-D means.
>
> Erica: I think what got in the way of my learning is that I thought I knew everything when it came to sculpture but as I work on this project I know I have a lot to learn.
>
> Dave: I know that if I was more organized that would help my learning. Then I wouldn't always forget where all the materials are stored.

…as well as ways in which the teacher and fellow classmates could better support their learning:

> Kevin: What would help my learning more is if the whole class was quieter when we begin working. I have problems concentrating on what steps to follow first and I think it would help if everyone was quiet for the first few minutes.

> Kate: What would help my learning is if the teacher could make me participate more in discussions. I rarely volunteer to talk and think that if I was forced to do that more I would have a better grasp of what's going on.

The fifth question, How did you feel? acknowledges that learning is both a matter of the mind and the heart. Jamie, when she asked her students how they felt about turning their paintings into sculptures received these responses: "[I feel] fine. I mean I just can't wait to get started!" Another student said, "[I feel] prepared and ready because we always talk about what's involved beforehand. Plus you always stop us and make us walk around and look at each other's work." In both cases, the teacher got the clear message that students were ready for and confident about the next stage of their work. Another student, Zack, however, felt nervous because his "painting came out so cool and I don't want to be disappointed if the sculpture doesn't look good." The teacher asked why. "Because I stink at 3-D stuff and work better on a flat surface," he replied. Again the teacher probed the class to see if others felt nervous. Some did, which let Zack know that he was not unique or alone in his fear, and therefore more ready to take the journey, knowing he was in good company. Once they got started on their sculptures she again asked how they were feeling, and at least one student responded, "I can't do this. This is too hard and [my sculpture] will never stand up." Jamie was immediately able to address his frustration. She later wrote in her reflection about the impact her use of descriptive feedback has had on her teaching and her students' learning:

> I'm learning that my students truly hold the answers to the improvement of my instruction and bettering their learning. I have discovered that every student and class is unique and reacts to my instructional strategies in different

> ways. That everyone is capable of sharing their thoughts of what works and what doesn't work in their learning environment. I am discovering [which] students are confident and [which ones] are frustrated in their learning [the] diverse concepts and media that I am teaching. The use of descriptive feedback is not only useful to me and what direction or changes I should make for the well being of my students, but [also] is comforting and useful to the kids. I believe they feel more responsible in the way they are learning by use of the descriptive [feedback]. Students who rarely participate [in class] are involved in these feedback discussions. As I continue to take time in involving students in reflective feedback I can see that they care about what they are learning and feel like [they] can talk about the process of their learning. One kid after class stopped me in the hall and told me that I was the first teacher he had ever had ask him about what he thought when it came to his learning. He thanked me and I almost cried. Part of me felt happy that he recognized what I was having the students take part in and the other part of me felt sad that he's gone through school never feeling like a teacher valued his thoughts on what he was being expected to learn. Going through this process of descriptive feedback with my students is making my role as a teacher positive and valuable, not only to my instruction...but [also in] the eyes of my students. (Jamie, March 2003)

Receiving feedback

One of the most difficult aspects of descriptive feedback is learning how to receive it was equanimity. There are several important caveats that teachers need to be aware of when practicing feedback. The first and most important—and most difficult—is to listen. As students offer feedback the teacher must attend carefully to their words—listening without expectation of what might be said, wide awake, as Maxine Greene says, to the truth of their words. At the same time, it is important that teachers not to accept students' words at face value, but to verify both their understanding of those words and gather evidence that supports them. It is also important to find out if other students have experienced similar feelings. It may be that it is isolated or it may be more widely felt. In

either case, the teacher must not assume that either is true without getting more information.

Being able to respond to feedback without explaining, defending, or justifying one's behavior takes practice. Most teachers have good intentions and want students to understand that. But students are wary of good intentions. The crucial first step is simply to respond with understanding, that is, for the teacher to let students know that she has "gotten" what they have said. A response of "I understand" is not sufficient. Understanding must be demonstrated through a clear restatement—a description, in fact—of what student have said. When students feel understood and taken seriously trust and respect can grow.

Many teachers are apprehensive about feedback because they fear it will open the door to students publicly passing judgment on their teaching, making them vulnerable, and thereby undermining their authority. It is important for teachers and students to be clear that feedback is about students' learning first, and only indirectly about the teacher's teaching. It is not a critique of teaching, but an *exploration* rather than a judgment of learning, and consequently of teaching. Teaching is implicated but not central, and not the students' responsibility. Students need to learn to reflect on and articulate their learning—a skill that takes practice and guidance. It may be the first time anyone has ever asked them to think about their learning, as Jamie's student indicated. When students' feedback does veer into advice with comments like, "You should do this..." the teacher needs to refocus the discussion on their learning with questions like, "Can you tell me how that would help your learning?" If students

answer with comments about what they like and don't like, the teachers again needs to push students to describe how these things affect their learning.

A third caveat is to avoid re-teaching. In the course of feedback students will reveal where they are lost, have misunderstood, or need further information. The temptation is jump in and fix things on the spot. But as soon as this happens, the feedback session is over. Listening has stopped and the teacher is teaching again. Control has been wrested from students' hands. The teacher needs to find out how pervasive the lack of understanding is and, after the feedback is over, determine how to address the gaps.

A fourth caveat is that teachers need to analyze and act upon the feedback they get, even if acting on it means explaining why they can't take any action. It is useful here to remember that reflection includes description of experience, analysis, and intelligent action. As such, the teacher, with her students, with other teachers, or by herself, needs to analyze students' feedback asking with an open mind, Is it legitimate? Does the evidence support the claims? Is this students' experience shared by others in the class? Is there a way of addressing the feedback that serves the needs of students as well as meeting the demands of the curriculum? Trust is engendered when feedback is understood, it is solidified when feedback is acted upon. Again, it is not a question of "doing whatever students want" but of taking stock of what best serves their learning and following through with action.

A final caveat is that feedback is not a silver bullet. It doesn't always work. I ask teachers trying feedback for the first time to use it after a lesson that

has felt particularly successful. I warn them to start small and safe. As trust and their own skills at asking for and receiving feedback grow, they can ask for it in the midst of risky situations. Inevitably, I have teachers who try feedback with classes that, for complex reasons, have been various degrees of disaster, hoping that an honest exchange might be the cure. In one recent case a teacher asked for feedback from a class that, in his words, was "in need of an overhaul." Whenever he tried to engage this group in discussion he found that

> many students in the room [would] take these times as a chance to talk to each other about topics unrelated to the class discussion. While some students are engaged, I frequently have to quiet others who pay little or no attention to me or to the students actively engaged. It is frustrating to me and to the students who are on task. … Because I fear losing control of the group, I tend to rely much more than I should, or want to on textbook readings and text driven worksheet assignments. The result is a dreary class that is as boring to me as it is to many of the students. … I think that they are disappointed in me as a teacher, and, as much as I try not to show it, I am disappointed in many of them as students. (MO'C, March, 2003)

He asked the group for feedback about the class in general and, along with feedback that asked for more project-based work, received the following response from one student. "Its [sic] hard to respect someone who you don't feel respects you. Being somewhere you don't want to be just distracts you from paying attention." Mike, an experienced teacher and father of three young boys, was devastated at this response. "This comment really stung," he wrote. "Clearly this student was being honest and thoughtful. I never want to be disrespectful to my students. To me, that is one of the worst things that can be said about a teacher." The following day he discussed the feedback (which in this case had been written) with his class. "I don't think I have ever seen this group so attentive. Every eye was on me as I spoke. I apologized to the class as a whole for anyone who felt the

things that this one student expressed. I think that this was one of the most difficult things that I have done as a teacher. But, I think that it may help me reach another level as a teacher, and maybe as a person too."

Unfortunately, even after Mike talked honestly and directly to the students about their feedback, apologized if anyone had felt disrespected, and assigned projects that asked students to investigate a year of their choice, displaying what they had found on poster board, creating a giant timeline, at least a third of the class did not make the effort to complete the assignment. Mike felt he had not only made himself vulnerable to the class, but had also come at least half way to meet their needs, only to be met with the same old behavior. There are many possible explanations. It may be that the project that Mike chose for them to do still felt like too much teacher control; it may be that after 11 years in the school system these students were simply too cynical to believe that any teacher had their best interests at heart; it may be that it was simply too late in the year to shift the relationship between teacher and students. Or it may be that once is simply not enough, and that Mike needs to persist with this group.

Shifts in teachers' perspective

Where does the use of descriptive processes in general, and descriptive feedback in particular lead? What difference do description and descriptive feedback make in the lives of teachers and students? In my work with teachers over the years I have witnessed three fundamental shifts. I discuss each shift below.

1) *From seeing teaching, self, and the curriculum as primary to seeing students and their learning as central.* This shift manifests itself in two ways. First, teachers become less preoccupied with themselves. As Heshusius put it when describing the stance teachers must take to listen well, they discover

> a way of being with others and with the self that is passively alert, vigilant but not intrusive, a way of attending that is characterized, as Schachtel (1959) states, by both "the totality of the act of interest" and the "participation of the total person" (p. 225). It involves a temporary eclipse of all egocentric thoughts and strivings, of all preoccupation with self (p. 181). One does not want or need anything from the other. One does not want to achieve anything (1995, p. 122).

As Charlie put it, she is now interested in "finding out if students are learning rather than just finding out if [I'm] teaching" (February, 2000). Dewey, in *Democracy and Education*, wrote about this phenomenon and called it "directness." Directness connotes a lack of pre-occupation with self or how one is perceived by others. In terms of teaching, it suggests a teacher who is less interested in who she is and what she has accomplished than she is in who her students are and how and what they have learned.

The second way that this shift manifests itself is that teachers begin to shift the weight they give to covering the material to students' learning. As KC wrote in his final paper for my course,

> I have learned that student learning takes precedence over my teaching—that "good teaching is a response to student learning." For the first three years of my teaching experience, I always figured my unsound teaching methods were the reason for my lack of success with the students, or, even worse, that it was the students' fault for not understanding the material. Never once did I consider student learning in the equation. Seriously! I figured that if the class average was a C+/B- (I believe this is the national average), I was doing my job. I measured my success by how far along the world history timeline I had traversed with my students or how many pages into the textbook we had read. Whether

> they actually learned anything never entered my thinking. (KCW: December 2002)

2) *From seeing students as people to be won over, or worse, as adversaries, to seeing them as partners whose share in power is equal.* Teachers feel great relief when they realize that they can ask their students about their experience and their needs rather than having to figure everything out on their own. Many teachers feel that if they are really good they should *know* what their students need and how to best meet those needs. If they have to ask, they must not be good enough. Just like lovers who think that if they have to ask for what they need from the other person that must mean that that person doesn't love them. It's like cheating to ask. But when teachers begin to ask for feedback, students begin to offer suggestions about how they could learn better, and suddenly a partnership is formed. The classroom becomes a community of learners—the teacher learns the students, and the students learn about the subject, each other, and even about the teacher and her teaching.

In addition, power becomes more equally distributed between teacher and students—through feedback, students have the power to shape their experience as learners. Rather than being in the position where their only choice is to conform to the teacher's expectations or not, students are in the position where their perspective can influence both those expectations and the way they are carried out. As students begin to experience teachers responding to their feedback and suggestions, trust begins to grow. The teacher can be counted upon not only to listen and to understand, but, more importantly, to act on that understanding on behalf of his or her students. To follow through. As one teacher put it, students

become "empowered learners rather than simple bystanders in the education process. When students realize that you truly value their input—whether you agree or not—they realize that they can help guide their learning without a backlash" (Carla H., March 2003). Or, as Jaime put it, "Many [of my students] are seeing that they have more control in their education and [they are] displaying it with enthusiasm and respect. That brings me gratitude and joy" (Jamie T., March 2003).

A partnership means that teachers and students are working towards a shared goal: students' learning. Rather than "pulling" their students to learn, like pulling a horse to water, teachers feel they are walking with students. With this comes the dawning of awareness that *students are where they are*. By this I mean that rather than focusing on where students "should" be but are not yet, and feeling frustrated at the gap between reality and expectations, feedback forces teachers to both see and accept where students are. After all, where can they begin *except* where students are? The fatigue that can accompany teachers as they bemoan the distance to be traveled and strain at the struggle of pulling their learners across the territory of the curriculum begins to diminish. This shift is clearly evident in Charlie's words. Two passages from a yearlong journal follow. The first passage was written before the idea of feedback had been introduced in our class. It is the description of a "moment" from her teaching. The second passage was written several months later, after the concept of feedback was familiar. I have italicized passages that indicate where Charlie felt frustrated from "pulling" her students to where they "should" be.

> The students are working in pairs on a three-station investigation from the science book. We read aloud the intro *and they know they're supposed to be looking for patterns.* I was roaming around the room, looking over shoulders as students tried to complete the activities at the three stations. I was trying to make sure each student was participating where possible. I was noticing a lot of pairs were confused by station one. *I was getting frustrated by the number of times I had to get students to slowly reread the procedure, check the materials list,* because they couldn't follow the procedure without having the correct materials. [Then I was] working with a very uptight, high pressure, school board chair daughter, who was so sure the procedure couldn't be done, she was ready to give up. *Asking her to reread it was only making her shut down more. I felt myself becoming more frustrated as she continued to deem the assignment impossible and stupid.* I did not want to just give answers nor do the work for the students. …I think my students would look back on the activity as fun…but *it was not fun for me* (Charlie, October, 1999).

Charlie clearly wanted her students to be other than where they were. Her frustration increased as theirs did. In the next passage we see a slowed down Charlie, more interested in the sense her kids were making of the challenge before them, and leaning on feedback as a way of getting the information she needed to best respond to their needs. She had just begun working on an academic fair with her co-teacher and their sixth grade students and asked for feedback to see if students "were feeling comfortable with our expectations."

> I think I got honest answers. It was really important to get this feedback early in the process to be sure that no one gets left behind. I feel it did let me know where the learners are right now and how I can help them. I was able to give and receive the feedback without emotion. My ego was not invested in their answers because I want them all to succeed and if the don't get it I don't have to blame anyone. I just want to work on it. I'm happy I asked for and received this form of feedback. … It felt good to know what students need extra help at this early and important stage of the process (Charlie, February, 2000).

In this passage one feels the distance that was apparent between Charlie and students in the first passage diminish. She is "with" her students now, and able

and ready to respond to their needs as they describe them. She shows satisfaction and pleasure with her students and her work.

3) *From seeing teaching as the cause of learning to seeing teaching as a response to learning*. When students begin to talk about their learning the curtain is suddenly pulled back on the wizard. No one can pretend any longer that the teacher is powerful enough to cause students' learning. No one can assume that just because the teacher has "covered" certain material, the students have learned it. Feedback reveals the complexity of the learning process and the powerful role that students play in their own learning. Teachers have heard the phrase "student centered" since their first days in teacher education. Yet few grasp its meaning. It is vaguely understood as caring about students or knowing their "learning styles." That it might mean giving students a voice in and power over their own learning is a revelation.

That learning can guide teaching is equally revolutionary. To most, this is a great relief; to those who resist, it feels like a blow to their identity as teachers. When this shift in awareness of one's role does occur it can feel like a shift in the wind. I recall an experience I had in my days as a Peace Corps volunteer in Senegal. The wind, which the Senegalese called the Harmatan, was blowing of the desert from Mauritania. It was hot, dry, and very dusty. My hair lay flat on my head in thin, electrically charged strands, the dust coated my eyes, nostrils, and throat. It would blow for days, then, without warning,, the wind would shift. Instead of coming off the desert it began to come off the sea. I felt as though I had walked through an invisible wall or curtain. My hair seemed to double in

volume, my skin became supple, and I could breathe again. The oppression of the heat lifted and there was just the lightness of the sea air. When teachers realize that teaching is as much a matter of response as it is invention, they are greatly relieved. As Jamie said in her reflection, "I'm learning that my students truly hold the answers to the improvement of my instruction and bettering their learning." The consequence of this insight is that they realize that in order to be able to respond to students' learning, they must be able to see it. And, in order to see it, they must both construct activities that will reveal students' thinking and continue to ask students questions about what is not revealed through their interactions with the subject matter.

Conclusion: Seeing and Being Seen

Descriptive feedback, rather than being an isolated act, I argue, is part of the larger scheme of reflective practice. It fits into a reflective process where learning to describe the experiences of the classroom and school leads to more considered analyses of what students know, need, and want, and more thoughtful plans and actions for how to meet and address those needs and desires. Descriptive feedback is one of the simplest and most effective ways of gathering descriptive data, but one of the least used. This is perhaps due to the fear associated with hearing students' truths, knowing that once these truths are revealed there is not putting them back in the bottle. It may also be due to the notion that knowledge, as Johnston and Nicholls (1995) put it, is something factual and separate rather than personal and constructed.

Rather than undermining teachers' power and authority, however, as many teachers fear, descriptive feedback enhances both while at the same time distributing that power and authority to students. In fact, it is enhanced because it is evenly distributed. Where trust lives, wonderful things can happen.

Descriptive feedback (along with other forms of description), offers a structure that disciplines one to listen to students and thereby to see them and their learning more clearly and fully, in more complex, nuanced, and differentiated ways. The magical thing that happens is, when teachers begin to see students, students begin to feel seen. Sometimes for the first time, teachers and students feel present to each other, not only as roles—teacher, student—but as human beings who are from moment to moment in the process of change, and who therefore have the need to talk about how that change affects their joint efforts at learning. Teachers begin, in McClintock's words, to "ensoul" their students, by "attributing to them the life they share with them" (Keller, 1983, p. 205). Teaching and learning, teacher and learner, no longer inhabit their separate domains but are connected and united in a common effort. I am reminded of a day when a teacher in one of my courses came to class with Möbius strip bracelets for the entire group.[11] On one side was the word "teaching," and on the other the word "learning". It is the nature of a Möbius strip, however, that there is only one side and one edge, despite the apparent duality of both edges and sides, making teaching and learning a continuous, united endeavor.

[11] A Möbius strip is a continuous single-sided surface formed by rotating one end of a strip through 180 degrees and joining it to the other end.

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